



Hydraulic mining in Smartsville

CALIFORNIA EDUCATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT INITIATIVE | Unit 4.3.3. | Witnessing the Gold Rush | Information Cards

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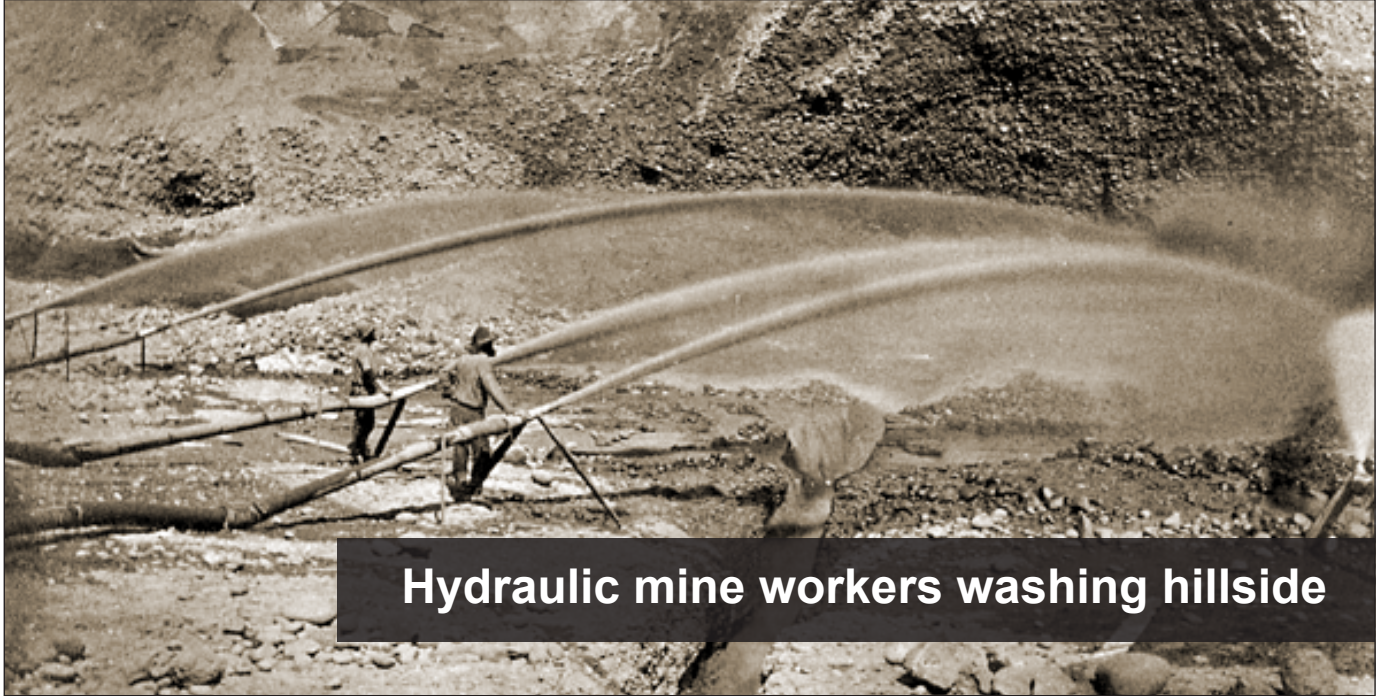
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Hydraulic mine workers operating monitors





**Hydraulic mine workers washing hillside**



**Hydraulic mine workers standing by water gate**









Hydraulic mining tail sluice



Hydraulic mining tailings emptying into Auburn Ravine

## Witness 1 (Farmer)

I do not care if the miners dig out all the gold they can find. But I do not want them to send the whole side of a hill down upon my ranch and bury me and all that I have. That is just what they have done and are doing. I want to be left alone. I do not know much about law and I do not want to. I would like to see a law put in force that says a man can use his property, but must not injure his neighbors.



## Witness 2 (Farmer)

The debris from the mining is harmful to all plant life. The only things that grow well are willows and cottonwood trees. Some people say that the debris helps the plants to grow. They say it is good for growing potatoes. The fact is that the area where I live is a large potato growing area. Potatoes once grew in the soil that had been protected by levees. Now, much of the land is covered with the debris from the mining operations and so is worthless. There are only a few areas where the potatoes can grow now.

### Witness 3 (Merchant)

There is a large amount of soil removed by hydraulic mining. It empties into the Sacramento River and clouds it for more than 400 miles. The mud is slowly filling up the Bay of San Francisco. I think it is going to affect the fish and other living things in the waterways.



The salmon were still swimming up the streams for a few years after hydraulic mining began. But their spawning beds (areas where they lay their eggs) are now covered by debris, and their eggs do not survive. As the old fish die or are killed, there are no new fish to take their place. The salmon have become extinct in these streams.

### Witness 4 (Merchant)

### Witness 5 (Merchant)

Marysville was a freshwater port that received boats from the East Coast. The boats carried supplies to miners. They also took grain grown in the valley to New York and even to Europe. Now the rivers are so filled up with debris that the boats cannot reach Marysville. If it stays this way we will not be able to get our goods and sell our grain.



### Witness 6 (Townsperson)

If the legislature (people who make laws) does not stop hydraulic mining, people will not be able to live in the Sacramento Valley anymore! Boats will not be able to travel down the rivers because they will be too filled up with debris. And the city of Marysville will be so filled up with debris that nothing will work.

## Witness 7 (Townsperson)

If you visit Marysville, ride out 15 miles to see the hydraulic mining. Miners wash huge amounts of soil into the sluices which rushes down the channels at railroad speed. You may even see large rocks rolling along. The soil that is washed away must go somewhere, and it is filling up the Yuba River. This river was once fast and clear. Now it is muddy and slow. The bottom of the river has been raised almost 50 feet by the mining debris. The river once contained trout and other fish, but now I imagine even a catfish would die in it.



## Witness 8 (Townsperson)

In the flood of 1875, the levees broke. Marysville was flooded with four feet of water. Afterward, the town was buried in about four feet of mud. Many buildings collapsed. The sewer of Marysville, where all of our human waste was carried, was destroyed. I am worried that the rushing water from hydraulic mining might have the same result.



### Witness 9 (Miner)

The farmers forget that they settled on their farms after we were already here. We have the water rights upstream. Our water rights allow us to dump debris and whatever we want into the rivers. If the farmers are bothered by the debris, they will have to find other ways to solve their problem because they cannot stop our mining.



The debris that farmers say covers their lands is not only because of mining. The debris that is filling up the lower rivers, bays, and harbors is not just the fault of the hydraulic miners. Another cause is farmers dumping their own debris in the waterways. Besides, this is not all bad. People can use the debris to fill up worthless land and make it valuable. A study of this should be done.

### Witness 10 (Miner)

## Introduction

Good morning, Class. My name is General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. I was born in 1808 in the town of Monterey, California. My family was *Californio*, which means my ancestors came from Spain. I served in the Mexican Army when California was still a part of Mexico. The Mexican government gave me a large piece of land on which I set up a rancho, called Petaluma, in present-day Sonoma County. By 1837, I was one of the richest men in Mexican California! Ten thousand cattle, thousands of sheep, and 5,000 horses roamed over my lands. But all that changed in 1849, when gold was discovered in California.

I understand you have some questions for me about my experience and the changes I saw occurring in California at that time. Who would like to start?



**Question 1: What did you think when people first started coming to California to look for gold?**

I was worried about the future of California. What was going to happen to the land? Would we have the same rights? Everything was changing so fast! When the first prospectors arrived, I gave many of them land. Little did I know what the long-term results of that would be!



## Question 2: What happened to you when the Mexican-American War began?

Well, the fighting began in 1846. Overall, I was in favor of California becoming part of the United States. But then a group of men took me captive and held me at Sutter's Fort for two months because I used to be part of the Mexican Army. When they let me go, I left Sacramento and went back home to Sonoma. I found a horrible surprise! While I was a prisoner, the U.S. Army had taken a lot of my property. I lost more than 1,000 cattle, 600 horses, and many other things from my house in Sonoma and from my Petaluma rancho. My wheat crops were gone, too; the cattle ate them. All was lost, and my only hope for making it better was to start working all over again.



Ah, yes. I was one of eight California delegates at the first California Constitutional Convention in 1849. I wanted to be a voice for the Californios and Indians of California. At the convention I supported giving Indians the right to vote, making slavery illegal in California, and allowing wives to own property. By the end of the convention, we had achieved several of these things. The California Constitution allowed married women the right to own property. (Women today have the same rights as men, but not in my time. Before this law, everything a woman had belonged to her husband.) The constitution also gave Indians the right to vote, but only for a very short time. Later, they again decided that Indians could not vote, and I was disappointed.

## Question 3: What happened at the first California Constitutional Convention?

### Question 4: Where did you want the state capital to be, and why?

This was a big issue during the first convention. After much debate, it was decided that San Jose would be the capital. However, in 1850 I convinced the lawmakers to move the capital to my hometown of Vallejo. I agreed to give 156 acres and \$370,000 for the construction of public buildings, including a university, governor's mansion, capitol building, orphanage, and a hospital. When lawmakers needed to meet in 1852, however, many buildings were not completed yet in Vallejo, so the capital was moved temporarily to Sacramento. It was moved back to Vallejo the following year, but then moved to Benicia in 1853. Finally, in 1854, Sacramento became the permanent state capital. I still wanted Vallejo to be the capital, especially because I had invested so much of my own money in the buildings.



Many prospectors who did not find gold decided to stay in California anyway. Quite a few of them lived on my property. They were squatters. I fought with them over who really owned the land. Then, in 1851 the United States passed a law that said that rancho owners had to prove their land really belonged to them. It was hard for some rancho owners to prove that they had gotten their land legally, including me. Most of us had received our lands from the Mexican government when Mexico ruled California. If we could not prove the land was ours, our ranchos were given away or sold to the squatters. I went from owning 250,000 acres around Sonoma to only 300 acres.

### Question 5: What happened to your lands after the Gold Rush?



### Question 6: How did the Gold Rush change farming in the state?

The quick population growth created a strong demand for food, especially meat. At first, the Californio cattle ranchers, such as myself, made a lot of money. Before the Gold Rush we were paid less than \$4 a head (for each animal); by late 1849 we were making \$500 a head! Prices averaged \$50 to \$150 a head during the 1850s. By 1872, most of the cattle ranches had been broken up and sold, including mine. Wheat became a more important crop, and fewer people raised cattle.



The Gold Rush took away the rights of Californios. We had no one to speak for us. In the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States promised to respect our land rights. However, when gold was discovered in California, all kinds of people came from all over the world. Some of them only cared about getting rich fast, no matter the cost. They wanted the land of the Californios, and they got it. Married women got the right to own property though, and, for a very short time, California Indians had the right to vote. California did not allow slavery, so many people that were not free in other states were free if they came to California.

### Question 7: How did the Gold Rush change people's rights in California?